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Turning empty office buildings into housing could instantly transform post-COVID cities

A business district only serves one use. Add in housing, and it becomes more like a 15-minute city, where work, home, and amenities are all a short walk or bike ride away.



[Photo: Andy Ryan/courtesy The Architectural Team]

The typical American business district is antithetical to the concept of the [15-minute city](#), which provides all your basic needs within a 15-minute walk or bike ride. Office buildings are segregated in one neighborhood, and most workers end up commuting by car. But if some office buildings stay empty post-pandemic, a portion of that space could be turned into housing, creating a mixed-use area out of a neighborhood that previously had only one use.



[Image: courtesy Hickok Cole]

“What do we do with all of these structures that are sitting there and don’t have full occupancy?” says Laurence Caudle, senior principal and director of housing at the design firm Hickok Cole, of office buildings in business districts. “They need to be economically viable ... and a 15-minute city is much more economically viable than one that [doesn’t have] a specific use during the weekend or evening.”

The 15-minute city—the idea that people should be a short walk or bike ride away from all of the places they need to go to in a typical day, because it makes cities both more

livable and more sustainable—is easier to accomplish in some areas than others. Paris, which has **championed the idea**, is already compact, but it's also pushing for more mixed-use buildings and neighborhoods, including transforming old office space into housing. One **former post office** there is turning into social housing, a hotel, offices, a childcare center, stores, a restaurant, and a logistics hub in the basement. In theory, this kind of adaptive reuse could happen more often.



[Image: courtesy Hickok Cole]

There are challenges, since not all office buildings can easily be turned into housing. Older buildings tend to be better suited for conversion; modern offices often have sprawling floor plans with a lot of space far from windows, and if apartments are added near those sources of light, it leaves extra unused space in the middle.

But it's possible to deal with less-than-ideal layouts, says Scott Maenpaa, a project manager at The Architectural Team, which works on conversions. "If we do have an abundance of unusable space, meaning interiors without natural lighting or ventilation, one thing that we've done is created amenity space on each floor," he says. In one project, for example, there are work pods in the middle of each floor that people can use if they work from home. In some cases, only part of a building is reused; Hickok Cole is currently working on a building in Washington, D.C., that keeps the base and lobby, with rebuilt new floors on top that are better designed for housing.



[Photo: Warren Jagger/courtesy The Architectural Team]

If an older building can be converted instead of building new housing from scratch, there can be environmental benefits. “These buildings have embodied energy—there was already energy that was spent creating them, making the bricks or forming the steel, transporting the materials to the site, having the labor to construct the materials and put it down,” Maenpaa says. “By reusing [materials], we’re not adding to that carbon footprint. And we’re not adding to the carbon footprint by having to demolish and truck the materials off-site and put them in a landfill somewhere.”



[Photo: Warren Jagger/courtesy The Architectural Team]

It's not clear yet how much office space will be permanently vacant, as companies continue to navigate decisions on remote and hybrid work. But a growing number of companies are deciding not to renew long leases. At some point, building owners may decide it makes more economic sense to use office buildings differently, at least in dense cities where land is expensive. And that could help start to reshape some neighborhoods. "We planned our city around cars way too much, with zoning that doesn't allow enough uses," says Caudle. "I think there's more progress now to allow more mixed uses."